

Jesus, Justice, and Status

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Kristy Manion

Luke 14:7-14

In 1737 the First Church of Christ in Northampton, Massachusetts, was outgrowing its meeting house. A new building was under construction. But a conflict was brewing, and it had to do—of all things—with a pew policy. A church seating chart. Northampton's leaders wanted to adjust the policy for the new building in a way that its pastor found unconscionable. And the conflict, one historian says, became a turning point, a link in the chain that ultimately led the church to fire their pastor.

The pastor was Jonathan Edwards-- a Protestant minister and missionary who actively shaped Christian revival efforts in the American colonies during the First Great Awakening. Today Edwards is noted as one of the finest Reformed theologians and philosophical thinkers native to this continent. And during his ministry he recognized evangelism through preaching the gospel and acts of mercy and justice as two sides of the same coin.

Northampton's existing pew policy had been "determined by a mixture of seniority, service to the community, and monetary donations to the church. [But] In the new building, the role of monetary donations in determining seating was greatly increased relative to the other factors."

"Edwards was livid. He saw the new policy as flagrant idolatry of money. He fought tooth and nail against it, and lost...." So on Christmas Day, the first Sunday in the new meeting house, Edwards didn't preach the heavenly peace bought by the baby in the manger. He preached on the issue of the day: "Some have statelier houses than others, and some are in higher office than others, and some are richer than others and have higher seats in the meeting house than others; but all graves are upon a level." ¹

Edwards goes on to describe the graveyard scenes for those laid to rest there in such colorful detail I didn't want to repeat them here, in a community where so many of us have experienced so much loss recently.

Edwards got just as exercised about status and power based on rank in church seating as Jesus did at the Prominent Pharisee's table. Jesus' message is as pointed and potentially offensive as that Christmas Day sermon at Northampton. "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited... When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed." Put another way, "Guests, your jockeying is all wrong! When you're invited to a wedding banquet, don't scramble for the places of honor. And Mr. Esteemed Pharisee, when you give a banquet, don't invite these sorts of people—the ones who are currently around your table." Is Jesus really concerned about dinner party etiquette? Is he simply offering practical wisdom to his hearers on avoiding embarrassing social situations? Luke gives us a clue that Jesus is pointing to something more. He calls Jesus' instruction a "parable,"

teaching with significance beyond its immediate meaning. When Jesus says “all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,” he is pointing to God’s role in establishing a kingdom order. In the order of God’s Kingdom, no one needs to elbow to the front of the line. No one is disqualified based on worldly status. Everyone at the table shares the same status: The status of guests, unworthy on their own, but made worthy by him to come to the table.

History also gives us clues about what is happening in this passage. Last week Peter mentioned Dr. Tim Keller’s book *Generous Justice*. Keller points out that in this passage Jesus is addressing the patronage system, an intricate network of relationships with rules governing favors and obligations between members. Patrons—people with means and influence—would support clients of lower class or status. They would help them climb the social ladder. In return, clients, ever beholden to their debt of gratitude, would advance the interests of their patrons. In this system the primary means of networking was the dinner party. In a world like this, there were no self-made men (not to mention the women), and if you were not already “at the table” so to speak, it wasn’t easy to get a seat. The best seats in the banquet house were based on social status. Good seats meant potential access to new, mutually-beneficial relationships. So the prominent Pharisee’s dinner guests aren’t just worried about getting their food while it’s hot. They want a brush with greatness. They’re motivated to network in the way a reporter at a press conference positions herself for the scoop.

If you were linked into the patronage system, failing to return banquet invitations or invite your relatives, friends, and rich neighbors was, according to Keller, “economic and social suicide.” (*Generous Justice* 47). Inviting “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” to a banquet could literally humble you by association. You would become like those you had invited. Offer resources and relationship to the poor, the blind, and the lame? Kiss the benefits of your social network goodbye.

And yet...this is exactly what Jesus asks his followers to do. The poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame are prized members of his Kingdom. They matter to Jesus; therefore, they matter to his followers. Keller writes: “[Jesus] commanded that his disciples should share their homes and build relationships not with people from their own social class (or higher) who would profit them, but with people who were poor and without influence, who could never pay them back with money or favors” (*Generous Justice* 47). Jesus isn’t talking about a friendly exchange of casseroles between peers when times are tough. He is not saying his followers can never have dinner with their friends. He IS saying that citizens of his Kingdom should not advance systems in which those who have, get more; and those who do not have watch as the little they have is taken away. Instead they should actively seek out relationships with people who cannot benefit them in terms of status, wealth, or influence.

So ambassadors of Jesus’ kingdom are to be radically and self-sacrificially invested in those whom the rest of the world overlooks. They are to consider their circle of influence, their own seats at the table, and invite the overlooked to pull up a chair. “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” We no longer operate patronage system like the one in the Roman world of Jesus’ time. But it remains true that some of us are advantaged in ways others aren’t.

I am one of the advantaged ones. I've had uninterrupted access to food and water, clothing, and shelter. I grew up in a family of faith, a family that could support me rather than needing me to support it. I attended school where my soul was shaped and my skills could grow. I've lived in one place long enough to form relationships that helped me get started in my life's work. The list could go on, and as I become more aware of how totally unfair that is, I try to receive these things not with guilt, but with thankfulness and open hands. These underlying "givens" propelled me into a comfortable and relatively functional adult life. Not everyone can say this, perhaps including some of us listening today.

So with the Apostle Paul I ask myself: "Who makes me different from anyone else? What do I have that I did not receive? And if I did receive it, why do I boast as though I did not?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

When we encounter people who don't have the status or the resources that we do, a small step toward obeying Jesus in inviting the overlooked is to be quietly curious about why our situations might be so different. What is it in another person's life—and what is it about culture and history, the way that families and governments and social structures and workplaces operate—that factors into why they find themselves where they do? What factors into why we find ourselves where we do? Choices we're able to make matter; so does the life situation we're born into. We may not be able to answer the questions, but the posture of curiosity itself widens our field of vision. Another step toward following Jesus on this is asking him to give us eternal perspective. When Jesus commands his Kingdom people to invite the overlooked, to use their influence for those who have no power, he offers them both a promise of the Kingdom yet-to-come: "Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Maybe you're a student with a wide circle of friends. And you're a citizen of God's Kingdom operating in the kingdom of this world. You begin to be curious about another student who doesn't seem to have the same social skills and network you do. You realize you might be willing to cash in some of your social capital to invite this newcomer into your group. It could cost you something. And to you, Jesus says, "This is really important to me, and I'm good for it. I'll pay you back at the resurrection of the righteous."

Or maybe you own a business with some financial margin. And you're a citizen of God's Kingdom operating in the kingdom of this world. You begin to be curious about a job applicant with potential and an unproven track record whose had some hard times. You think it over, talk to a few references, and realize you're willing to risk hiring this person. It could cost you something. Don't worry, Jesus says. I'm good for it. I'll pay you back at the resurrection of the righteous."

Can you believe Jesus says that? God—who needs nothing and has everything—invites us to the feast of his everlasting Kingdom. He washes us in the blood of Jesus. He gives us a place in his love and feeds us at his table by the sacrifice of himself. This God would consider our obedience to him on this a debt that he'll repay? That feels completely backwards. But it's what Jesus says. It's what Proverbs 19:17 says too. "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and the Lord will reward them for what they have done."

C.S. Lewis offers an imaginative, fantastical picture of God's kingdom in the life to come in his book *The Great Divorce*. The story's narrator takes an imaginary bus trip from hell to the

outskirts of heaven. At one point the narrator is stopped in his tracks by the beauty of a processional and the heavenly woman it honors. Music and flower petals fill the air. The scene has such power to refresh that the narrator doubts that anyone under its spell could ever get sick or grow old. The narrator asks his guide who this woman is. “It’s someone you’ll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith....” “She seems to be.... well, a person of particular importance?” “Aye. She is one of the great ones. Ye have heard that fame in this country and fame on earth are two quite different things.” “Every young man or boy that met her became her son, even if he just delivered the meat to her back door.... Every girl that met her was her daughter.” The guide goes on to say that men who met Sarah Smith loved her in a way that made their love for their wives truer and richer. And every living thing Sarah Smith touched—human or animal--had its place in her love. So, the heavenly guide concludes, “In her they became themselves. And now the abundance of life she has in Christ from the Father flows over into them.” 2

Brothers and sisters, I ask Jesus for eyes to recognize the Sarah Smiths of this world—people who have minimal recognition or honor here but through whom our God is building his Kingdom. I want eyes to recognize the least, the little, and the lost for whom he is carefully setting his table. Because we are looking forward to being together someday, the greatest and the least in the eyes of the world, and we will come to the table as equals. None of us will have earned our status there and every one of us will enter as a beloved guest, wholly dependent on the host’s gracious invitation and sacrificial love poured out on the cross. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gifts.

1 Greg Forster, “Why Jonathan Edwards Saw Economic Justice as a Gospel Concern”
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-jonathan-edwards-saw-economic-justice-as-gospel-concern/>

2 C.S. Lewis *The Great Divorce*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1945, 107-108.

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